

Arizona High School Renewal and Improvement Initiative

A Report of the Regional Focus Groups on High School Renewal



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www.ade.state.az.us/asd/AZSRI/default.asp

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Participants in the Focus Groups will receive a copy of this report, but were not involved in developing the recommendations, reviewing the data from the focus groups they did not attend, or writing or reviewing the report prior to its release. The findings in this report do not necessarily represent the views of individual focus group participants. Quotations cited in the report are anonymous, honoring agreements made with focus group participants prior to their participation in the discussions and completion of feedback forms.

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Introduction

Arizona is poised to usher in exciting renewal activities in its high schools, activities that will help to ensure all students in Arizona achieve to high levels and graduate from high school ready for college, work, and success in life. A broad cross-section of school, community, and governmental leaders are looking at the performance of Arizona's high school students and are studying ways to improve the goals, organization, and results of Arizona's high schools.

There are many reasons why Arizonans believe high school renewal so critical. Most significant are hopes that more and more of Arizona's high school students ultimately will graduate and that they will graduate proficient in Arizona's content and performance standards. Only 76.4% of students starting high school in the fall of 1998 graduated by spring 2003. 33.6% of Arizona's Hispanic students did not graduate in five years, 37% of Native American students did not graduate; and 29.8% African American did not graduate in five years.¹ Further, there is not general consensus that each of those students who did graduate was well prepared for a competitive economy or post-secondary education.

In an effort to ensure all of Arizona's high school students achieve to the standards, the Arizona State Legislature recently authorized an assessment and accountability system, which requires all students to pass Arizona's Instrument for Measuring the Standards, or the AIMS test, in order to graduate. The class of 2006 is the first class that will be required to pass AIMS to graduate. In the spring 2004 administration (the first opportunity the class of 2006 had to take the test, which was when they were sophomores), 59% of that class who took AIMS without accommodations passed the reading portion, 62% passed the writing portion, and 39% passed the mathematics portion of the AIMS assessment.² In the fall 2004 administration, students were retested in areas where they underperformed. 36% of the class who took the reading "retest" passed, 46% of 11th graders who took the writing retest passed, and 22% of the class who took the mathematics retest passed.³

Statewide concern that all students pass the AIMS test is creating conditions for real renewal to occur in Arizona's high schools. Arizonans across the board are eager for

change—and they are ready for a legitimate group of stakeholders to provide leadership in identifying strategies for renewal that schools, school districts, and communities can join together to undertake.

To help provide that leadership, the Arizona Department of Education convened a statewide team to study the high school context in Arizona and to develop action plans for high school renewal. After their first full meeting in the summer of 2004, the State Team determined they needed to conduct a needs assessment of stakeholders from across the state in order to determine the unique Arizona context for improving high school. In response, the Arizona Department of Education and WestEd joined to organize four Regional Focus Groups on High School Renewal. The Focus Groups were held October 14 in Yuma, October 15 in Tucson, October 18 in Flagstaff, and October 19 in Phoenix. The Focus Groups were convened to advise the Arizona High School Renewal and Improvement Initiative State Team on a number of key topics:

- what matters most to the many diverse stakeholders unique to Arizona;
- what are the expectations for student performance within the schools and the broader community;
- what students need in order to be successful in high school;
- what ideas for renewal hold promise or are at peril; and
- how ready the schools and communities are to take on high school renewal initiatives.

One hundred and eleven stakeholders took part in the focus groups, representing a diverse array of interests, including those of students, parents, teachers, principals, administrators, elected officials, business and industry, higher education, and middle level education; charter schools, alternative schools, and regular comprehensive high schools; and urban, suburban, and rural schools. These stakeholders joined together to advise the AZHSRI State Team on the development and implementation of action plans for high school renewal. (A listing of participants in each of the four focus groups is included as Appendix 2, accessible in the online report at www.ade.state.az.us/asd/AZHSRI/default.asp.)

Questions were posed to each focus group in order to elicit their priorities, analyses, and ideas. In general, focus group participants felt the process captured their comments and were satisfied the goals of the focus groups were met. (See Appendix 4 in the full online report, accessible at www.ade.state.az.us/asd/AZHSRI/default.asp, for detailed evaluative data from the focus groups.) This report will be forwarded to each participant for their individual review.

Researchers analyzed the results and prepared the following recommendations for the AZHSRI State Team and the Arizona Department of Education. The AZHSRI State Team will be meeting February 2, 2005, to review these recommendations and the various initiatives underway in Arizona around high school renewal. At that meeting, the State Team will begin to develop a series of action plans to encourage state and local improvement efforts.

It is anticipated that additional data will be gathered at focus groups in communities that were under-represented in the regional sessions. In particular, one focus group will be organized within the Native American community. There is hope that a second focus group will be convened of high school students who have either dropped out, are at risk of dropping out, or who are in alternative high school programs.

Endnotes

- ¹ Arizona Department of Education, *Graduation Rate Study, 4 and 5 Year Cohort Class of 2002*, <http://www.ade.az.gov/ResearchPolicy/grad/20025yearGradReport.pdf>, accessed October 2004.
- ² Arizona Department of Education, *AIMS Report Wizard*, <http://www.ade.az.gov/profile/publicview/>, accessed October 2004.
- ³ Arizona Department of Education, *AIMS Report Wizard*, <http://www.ade.state.az.us/profile/publicview/>, accessed January 2005.

Recommendations

Following are key recommendations based on analysis of the Focus Group results. At the focus groups, facilitators captured individual comments on flip charts, both in large- and small-group discussions. Researchers at West Wind Enterprises then sorted comments into general categories and rank ordered them by the frequency with which comments were given in each category. The researchers analyzed the results and prepared the following recommendations for the AZHSRI State Team and the Arizona Department of Education. It is important to note that focus group participants did not vote on recommendations for the State Team; the recommendations are developed by researchers from the comments and common themes that emerged out of all of the focus group sessions.

These recommendations, as well as the supporting data, are the result of specific inquiries targeted to a small sample of public education stakeholders in the state of Arizona. Thus, though they are of great utility, they are limited in that they do not account for concerns and potential solutions that may not have fit within the framework of the focus group format. While focus group participants were given numerous opportunities to provide comments in different formats (large- and small-group discussions, written feedback forms, and post-focus group correspondence), time and the questions themselves necessarily limit the range of responses provided by participants. In addition, focus groups were comprised of fewer than thirty participants per site. This provided each participant ample opportunity to engage in the conversations, but the focus group format does not lend itself to findings that are generalizable to the full population of stakeholders in Arizona. Participants' responses also reflect and are limited to their respective areas of expertise as they attempt to address direct questions.

Therefore, it is best to use these types of data and consequent recommendations as a foundation for action planning and as direction for further study, including the research of best practices and lessons learned in other fields. Going forward, the State Team should not be limited to the results of these focus groups alone, but should use these results creatively to forecast, strategize, and customize partnerships and action plans.

A listing of key recommendations follows. Descriptive details of each recommendation is provided immediately after the list.

I. Clearly and Convincingly Justify High School Renewal

- A. Define Arizona's expectations for high school students in a clear, concrete vision statement
- B. Include in the vision statement the expectations Arizona has for its high school graduates, including proficiency in core content areas, the arts, and citizenship; preparation for the workforce, higher education, and life in general; and the ability and desire to engage in lifelong learning
- C. Develop action plans with short-term "quick wins," medium-term actions, and long-term changes
- D. Identify and include in the action plans resources for high school renewal, including partnerships and opportunities for collaboration with stakeholders and allies
- E. Identify and include in the action plans messages that motivate the public and make the case for renewal
- F. Present the vision and action plans in a continuous improvement mode

II. Ensure All Students Have Access to a Rigorous, Relevant, Comprehensive Curriculum

- A. Ensure the curriculum is well-rounded—and rigorous
- B. Learn from, encourage, and expand Career and Technical Education
- C. Recognize and address the importance of student motivation

III. Improve Instruction

- A. Improve teacher preparation
- B. Improve teacher professional development
- C. Use knowledge about adolescent development in instructional strategies and plans for school organization
- D. Change the professional culture of school communities

IV. Reduce the Number of Students Who Drop Out Early

V. Diagnose Potential Resistance to Change and Address as Required

VI. Ensure AIMS is a Sustainable Instrument for Improvement

- A. Continuously inform the public about AIMS
- B. Analyze AIMS results and publicize findings
- C. Help students to pass AIMS

Commentary on Recommendations

Clearly and Convincingly Justify High School Renewal

Part of the challenge of renewal is not only accommodating the many different visions for what high schools should be, but addressing the various, distinct reasons to initiate renewal. There was a sense among focus group participants that there are competing visions of what our high school students need and that absent a clear, compelling, and common vision, renewal efforts will flounder. Arizona needs a compelling and galvanizing case for renewal, including the key issues and the means by which everyone in the community can support the improvements that will need to be made to address those issues.

“We have not fully
or adequately defined
what is broken!”

[Business/Industry Representative]

Define Arizona's expectations for high school students in a clear, concrete vision statement.

The State Team is in a unique position to outline a vision for high school renewal in Arizona and focus group participants suggested that such an outline would be welcomed. A clearly stated vision for high school renewal will help the State Team to make decisions about priorities and action plans and local schools to decide how they will approach high school renewal.

A vision for high school renewal must provide a sense of urgency and duration. Focus group participants often remarked that people at all levels will resist change when it is perceived as “change for change’s sake” or as the “change of the day,” which will go away just like so many other fads in education reform. A compelling vision for *why* we need renewal in our high schools, coupled with the existing impetus for change brought on by the implementation of the AIMS graduation requirements, will likely encourage schools and communities to approach renewal with seriousness and commitment.

“There has always been change in
education. Whatever changes are
decided upon may be perceived as
the idea of the day.”

[Arizona Department of Education Staffmember]

A vision for high school renewal must also make crystal clear not only do high school standards need to be high in the 21st century, but every child needs to achieve to those standards. Too many of Arizona’s students drop out over the course of high school. A clear, simple fact sheet about Arizona’s drop out statistics would be helpful in making the case for engaging in high school renewal.

Finally, a compelling vision must be backed up by supportive research and convincing information about best practice as possible—information about relevant topics such as student learning styles; comprehensive school reform models; and the development of collaborative, professional teaching communities. Local schools and communities will ultimately need to make decisions for themselves about how they undertake high school renewal, but they need to have at their disposal research-based information about what works.

Include in the vision statement the expectations Arizona has for its high school graduates, including proficiency in core content areas, the arts, and citizenship; preparation for the workforce, higher education, and life in general; and the ability and desire to engage in lifelong learning.

Focus group participants want to ensure that Arizona's high school students graduate with an understanding of the core content areas. They believe that Arizona's standards provide a strong template for what should be learned in high school. They want to make sure that *all* students have access to a rich curriculum and that their experience be well rounded. They want to ensure competency in the traditional core, but it was also very important to focus group participants that students have access to learning in areas such as the arts and foreign languages. They were concerned that too much of an emphasis on building student skills in reading and math might lead to a reduction in the kinds of offerings that motivate students the most and that enrich their learning. In particular, focus group participants mentioned the arts, foreign languages, and extra curricular activities as important to student learning.

A central concern for focus group participants is that students be adequately prepared for entry into a high performance economy—whether they enter the workforce immediately after high school or after further education. This means not only that students will be schooled in a vocation, but that they have a deep understanding of core academic areas that

“I think our goal should be to produce productive members of the community, people who can support themselves and also contribute to their community or their society.”

[School Board President]

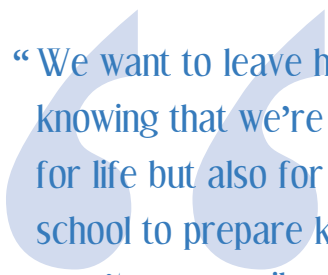
allows them to effectively communicate, use with ease appropriate mathematics in the workplace, and gather new knowledge and learn new skills over the course of their lifetimes. Focus group participants were very clear that all students need more than just book knowledge from their high schools; they need experiences that help them develop skills, habits, and dispositions that will allow them find success in the workplace and that will support the economic vitality of the broader society. Students need to be able to solve problems, particularly by finding and using new information to come up with solutions to those problems. They will also need to be able to

work in teams, learn over the course of their lifetimes, and develop the kind of work ethic that includes traits as simple as showing up on time and carrying through on promises. Underlying focus group participants' comments about these types of knowledge, skills, habits, and dispositions is a sense that our current high school system was not organized with these kinds of requirements in mind. There is a new economy, and workers need a new level of knowledge and skills to be successful in that economy and to successfully move Arizona into the 21st century. This is a key reason why high schools need to change.

Focus group participants did not focus solely on workplace skills, however, just as they did not focus solely on a few academic subjects. Beyond the workplace, Arizona also needs citizens who have a sense of civic responsibility and who have been prepared to develop over a lifetime the skills they will need to make good decisions personally and as members of society. As much as focus group participants focused on success in the workplace as a goal both

for individual students and the society at large, they were quick to remind that high schools must provide the kinds of learning opportunities and experiences that help students learn and practice civic values. While many of the core values and skills citizens need to be responsible in a democracy are no different now than they were fifty years ago, there are many forces today that do require a change in how we prepare children. Though focus group participants did not dwell on these forces, they were clear that they did not just want a system of high schools that prepares students to be workers—they want a comprehensive curriculum that also recognizes and develops the skills of citizenship.

Finally, while they were quick to point out that schools should understand that not all students will go to college, and that the non-college bound need high quality offerings, focus group participants recognized college is an aspiration of the majority of students and recommended that high schools should provide opportunities for all students to be prepared for that potential future.



“We want to leave high school knowing that we’re prepared for life but also for high school to prepare kids who aren’t necessarily going to go to college right away.”

[High School Student]

Develop action plans that include short-term quick wins, medium-term actions, and long-term changes.

High school renewal at the magnitude suggested by focus group participants requires a major shift in the expectations, organization, and functions of an institution that has resisted change for more than a century. Most changes suggested by the focus groups are long-term in nature. However, lessons from organizational change and community organizing tell us that a plan for change cannot rely solely on a long-term vision. The action plan for Arizona’s high school renewal needs to include short-, medium-, and long-term plans for improvements. All stakeholders need to experience success and see progress toward what is ultimately a long-term agenda for improvement. By identifying a series of “quick wins,” leaders in high school renewal can help to jump start the renewal initiative and engage stakeholders early in the process.

Leaders must also pay attention to the potential unintended consequences of some quick wins and temper choices about short-term actions with reminders from the long-term vision. It may be possible, for example, to raise the test scores of the students who have not yet passed the AIMS test by focusing their schooling exclusively on drill and practice in reading, mathematics, and test taking strategies. However, such an approach would run counter to the hopes that students have a well-rounded curriculum that motivates them to work hard and prepares them fully for life after high school. By beginning with an overarching vision and paying attention to long-term goals and expectations, leaders of the renewal efforts can help to temper potentially counter-productive short-term actions.

Identify and include in the action plans resources for high school renewal, including partnerships and opportunities for collaboration with stakeholders and allies.

Individual stakeholders, schools, and organizations do not have the capacity to take on the entire agenda for high school renewal, but, rather, will rely on allies to bring new ideas,

resources, and energy to the renewal process. The AZHSRI State Team is in a unique position to identify specific stakeholders and organizations that can take responsibility for leading the various strategies within the action plan—and then to suggest, cajole, and encourage those leaders to step up to the plate. The State Team itself may not have “deep pockets,” but by using the “bully pulpit” and by going back to the members’ constituency organizations, the State Team should be able to bring a great deal of capacity to the table.

In addition, the state team should think broadly about who the allies are in this work. State level leaders such as the governor, state superintendent of education, state board of education, state legislators, and statewide advocacy and membership organizations must be engaged. District-level leaders such as superintendents and central office staff, school board members, business leaders, and municipal officials should take up the charge of high school renewal. Local leaders such as principals, teachers, parents, students, and support personnel need not only to make change, but also to help define and drive the change. By engaging all of these stakeholders both in cross-functional groups and in their affinity groups, the State Team can ensure they develop thoughtful action plans that address the needs and hopes of the communities and that have the buy-in and support of those who are tasked with implementing change.

“There needs to be a lot more communication with the larger community as to what is going to happen to make that change.”

[Small Business Owner]

Identify and include in the action plans messages that motivate the public and make the case for renewal.

The State Team should also pay careful attention to what messages resonate well with the general public and with decision makers who have the power and authority to support change. Education is a field rife with jargon, which can be useful as shorthand in internal planning efforts but which can also alienate and confuse the broader community. The State Team should work hard to avoid jargon in their communications with the public. Education is also a field where

multiple messages can be delivered toward the same ultimate goal. The State Team should determine which messages resonate well and which messages confuse the core issues.

Present the vision and resulting action plans in a continuous improvement mode.

Believing their input had been recognized and will be forwarded to—and considered by—the State Team, focus group participants ended their sessions with a call for more directed public conversations in the future. There are still particular constituents that should be quickly engaged in a focus group setting in order to gather further information at the outset.⁴ Given these caveats, most participants felt that the State Team has enough input to forge a vision that they could present to the broader Arizona public. The State Team must continue to refine the vision as more and more people are engaged in the public discussions about high schools. Focus group participants conveyed their sense that there had been genuine public engagement in the early stages of this initiative and the State Team could legitimately begin making a public case for a specific line of action—as long as they continue to engage the broader public and are open to ongoing refinement of the vision and the action plan based on public input.

It is important for the State Team to understand that no matter how strong the case might be made for certain goals and actions necessary to achieve high school renewal, local schools and communities must take the information and action plans and implement them in their local context. The State Team should ward against letting “endless discussions” thwart forward movement—if nothing else, students needing to pass AIMS do not have time for adults to deliberate for years on end—but at the same time it should encourage local stakeholders to come to the table as decisions are made in local communities. In general, focus group participants suggested that if everyone is at the table in meaningful ways, it is preferable to present the system with a plan of action—just be certain to understand that local communities and schools will need to “own” their action plans and be the ones to carry it out.

Ensure All Students Have Access to a Rigorous, Relevant, Comprehensive Curriculum

Out of all the ideas for renewal generated by focus group participants, ideas related to the equal access of *all* students to a renewed curriculum came out on top. Focus group participants expressed their desire for a well-rounded curriculum that includes core subjects such as reading and mathematics supplemented by a range of additional subject areas. Participants also expressed the importance of a curriculum that includes objectives for workplace success and life skills in its design. A third priority among focus group participants is the inclusion of high quality career and technical education, an acknowledgement of the role of student motivation in high school curriculum design, and a recognition of the importance of extra-curricular activities to student experiences and outcomes.

Ensure the curriculum is well-rounded—and rigorous.

As high schools strive to improve student performance, their understanding of the types of performances that matter must be broad and rigorous. First and foremost, focus group participants want to ensure that Arizona’s students are proficient in reading and mathematics.

However, focus group participants regularly followed comments about proficiency in these core content areas with restatements of their beliefs that subject areas such as civics, the sciences, foreign languages, and the arts are also critical in Arizona’s high schools. Proficiency in reading and mathematics, while important, does not cover the full range of comprehensive curricular outcomes focus group participants want to see from their high schools. They believe that a well-rounded curriculum is necessary to help students gain access to the rich set of knowledge, skills, and ideas that they valued. As an added bonus, many participants suggested that enrichment activities and a comprehensive curriculum can help students to perform well in the core content areas. Further discussion of the focus group participants’ interests in a well-rounded curriculum is in the above section on the vision statement.

Beyond academic subject competency, focus group participants expressed a strong desire that high school curricula frame explicit objectives related to the skills, habits, and disposi-

Wouldn’t it be nice if... “all high schools in Arizona were able to meet the needs of all students and produce graduates ready for citizenship and either work or higher ed.”

[Business and Industry Representative]

tions the curriculum will help to develop among students. Proficiency in problem solving, team work, and workplace ethics are examples of the additional outcomes focus group participants expect from the curricula in the schools. Again, these findings are discussed in the vision statement section above.

In addition to the breadth of the high school curriculum, focus group participants are concerned about the depth of learning. There was a widespread interest among focus group participants that the curriculum is rigorous enough to ensure all students graduate high school ready to succeed. Some focus group participants cautioned the groups that when curricular goals are too varied and broad, students often are not given the opportunity to learn any subjects in great depth. By and large, this resonated with the groups, clarifying that their key concern was that as the state focuses exit exams—perhaps appropriately—on reading and mathematics, Arizona must not lose sight of the importance of a rich and varied curriculum for all students. In offering a well-rounded curriculum, however, Arizona should similarly not compromise the need for rigor. Finding a balance between comprehensive curricular goals and opportunities for in-depth learning will be a key challenge before high school educators and leaders.

Learn from, encourage, and expand Career and Technical Education.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) was the most frequently mentioned curricular program that is working well in Arizona high schools today. A diverse cross-section of focus group participants brought up CTE in each session. Support for CTE came not just from CTE educators or from businesspeople—principals, students, faculty at institutions of higher education, and high school teachers in the core academic subjects all remarked on the value of CTE as currently defined in Arizona.

The integration of academics with relevant career education is what impressed focus group participants the most. When vocational lessons are combined with rigorous academic learning, CTE has a relevance to students that is highly motivating. Some participants suggested that all students would benefit by more direct connections between their course work and career options; one weakness they identified of the traditional college preparatory curriculum is its lack of relevance to the world of work. University-bound students will one day enter the workforce, they said, and the relevance of their “book learning” to their roles as wage earners is equally motivating and important educationally to Advanced Placement students as it is to traditional CTE students. As one focus group participant in higher education indicated, “[students need to have] an understanding of how that which they are being taught might serve them in the future.”

Focus group participants also recognized that many of the same proficiencies needed for success in higher education are now needed for success in the workplace. Their comments are supported by analysis done by the American Diploma Project after they investigated the expectations held by employers and higher education in six states. The American Diploma Project found, “Successful preparation for both postsecondary education and employment requires learning the same rigorous English and mathematics content and skills. No longer do students planning to go to work after high school need a different and less rigorous curriculum than those planning to go to college.”⁵ Evidence offered by focus group participants

suggest that effective CTE programs in Arizona can help to ensure that students will achieve to these common high levels. Participants suggested that CTE students did better on AIMS than students in traditional courses and that CTE in Arizona is preparing students for entry into *either* the workforce or post-secondary education. Improvement efforts should take advantage of the apparent success of CTE by using it to provide credible, viable, rigorous educational options to students who prefer a direct pathway to the workforce, as well as to model how programs can integrate the “real world” with academics for *all* students.

Recognize and address the importance of student motivation.

One feature of CTE that is so powerful to focus group participants is that it both feeds off of and increases student motivation. The State Team should be careful to ensure that any action plans they recommend take into account the important issue of student motivation. The important reminder from focus group participants is that any of approach to learning and teaching can be implemented in ways that motivate students to stay in school and to do well. When designing a rigorous curriculum and supporting student achievement on the AIMS assessments, Arizona’s high schools must not lose the kinds of enrichment activities, course work, and pedagogical strategies that can both contribute to student performance in the core subject areas and motivate students to stay in school and to do well.

Student comments about the role of motivation in their decisions to stay in school and work hard were particularly notable. Students often mentioned how important high school offerings like athletics, clubs, and the arts are to them and to their peers and how often an extra-curricular activity is the key activity that keeps a student in school. Numerous focus group participants also commented that academic outcomes can be encouraged through participation in extra-curricular activities. Many advocates of extra-curricular activities talk about such activities as being “co-curricular,” indicating the potential for those activities to directly support student achievement of the standards.

Yet, participants expressed their worry that extra-curricular activities might be the first to be cut in times of budget reductions, a narrowing of the definition of student proficiency, or attempts at targeting student learning opportunities to more focused content areas. There was some concern that in the drive to raise mathematics and reading scores—particularly in response to AIMS—high schools will simply double-up on instruction in those areas at the expense of extra curricular and enrichment activities and education in the arts. Focus group participants suggested that the State Team should acknowledge issues of student motivation and guard against unintended consequences of curricular or scheduling decisions that may have the consequence of limiting the kinds of opportunities that students find most motivating.

The emphasis that focus group participants placed on extra curricular activities and student outcomes beyond the core curriculum should not be interpreted as a willingness on the part of the participants to lower standards in any way. Arizona’s standards currently describe a well-rounded set of knowledge and skills that all students should access in high school. A curriculum that supports the complete set of standards should provide information, ideas, materials, and learning experiences that are relevant, motivating, and varied. If all students are to learn to *high* standards, that curriculum must also be rigorous. Therefore, the commit-

ment that focus group participants had to finding a way for each student to succeed should not translate into a lowering of the standards. Rather, a rigorous curriculum should be made available to all, whether through traditional coursework, Career and Technical Education, or extra-curricular and other enrichment activities.

Improve Instruction

When considering the most critical changes needed in Arizona's high schools, focus group participants were consistent in stating that high quality instruction is a necessary key to stu-

“I don’t know that secondary teachers have been taught how to teach the way that we’re asking them to teach now.”

[High School Principal]

dent success. No matter how relevant the curriculum, students access that curriculum through the instructional strategies employed by their teachers. The full spectrum of stakeholders at the focus groups recognized the critical role of teachers. Their comments indicated that while they wanted teachers who care about their students and are able to demonstrate their genuine concern about student achievement, they are most interested in providing teachers with additional skills, tools, resources, and the right kinds of organizational structures to support their efforts at improving achievement among *all* students. Key among the ideas for change related to teach-

ers were improving teacher preparation programs; improving the amount, quality, and focus of teacher professional development; and changing the professional culture of school communities to encourage collaboration.

Improve teacher preparation programs.

When focus group participants suggested that initial preparation programs could be improved, the idea resonated among the rest of the participants. Teachers need to be knowledgeable in their content areas, but even more importantly, they need effective teaching strategies. Focus group participants were especially concerned that teachers are not being well-enough prepared with standards-based instructional strategies. As potential teachers are being prepared to enter the field, they should be taught about different learning styles and strategies to engage these styles. They should be well-versed in the content standards within their own fields and in related fields. They should learn about assessments that can provide formative as well as summative data on student performance. And they should be able to analyze curricular tools for their relevance to students' achievement of the standards.

Many focus group participants also expressed a desire that teachers learn how to individualize or differentiate instruction, a desire that made intuitive sense to the rest of the participants. The idea of developing individualized educational plans (IEPs) for all students was mentioned often. Focus group participants recognized this would entail a completely different set of skills and strategies among teachers than is currently expected and taught in preparation programs.

Focus group participants hoped higher education programs that prepare teachers would change in response to these new desires for the teaching staff. Some focus group participants suggested that higher education faculty could themselves become more effective if they

developed partnerships with local high schools and spent time in the schools and classrooms. At a preliminary meeting prior to the focus groups, a community college representative expressed interest in helping her faculty to learn the kinds of standards-based instructional strategies that were described for the high school faculty. If aspiring teachers are to be well prepared for the renewed high schools envisioned by focus group participants, preparation programs at post-secondary institutions will also need to undergo renewal.

Improve teacher professional development.

While teacher preparation is the first step in a logical sequence of developing high quality teachers, on-the-job professional development was the strategy most often mentioned by focus group participants. There was an understanding among a cross section of focus group participants that professionals need opportunity for ongoing growth and development over the life of their profession. This idea resonated not only among the professional educators in the focus groups, but also business people who understand the importance of ongoing training. As teachers are engaged with their students and student work, they need ongoing opportunities to reflect on their practice and assistance in making decisions about curricular and pedagogical strategies based on what their students are and are not catching onto. This requires time, access to sustained training, and supportive in-school environments—all of which require funding and resources not only for the staff development courses, but also for resources such as coaching, tuition reimbursement, and substitute teachers or extended school years for teachers.

Use knowledge about adolescent development in instructional strategies and plans for school organization.

Though it was not addressed as explicitly as were subjects like CTE and extra curricular activities, the issue of adolescent development came up in numerous guises. Focus group participants were cognizant of the fact that high schools are filled with teenagers and that teenagers are going through important personal, social, and developmental stages while preparing to enter, experience, and exit high school. Though there was a more direct emphasis on doing what we know from the research in terms of curricular design, academic content, teacher preparation, and career or college guidance, there was an underlying acknowledgment that schools must deal with more than just students' academic foundations for learning. High school is a time of tremendously important personal and social change among its students. High school schedules, teaching, guidance, and rituals must understand and respect those milestones in adolescent development.

Comments from the focus groups that touched on this issue focused most on the personal challenges and individual developmental stages that high school students experience. Students, counselors, and school leaders must all be well versed in adolescent development in order to make good choices about how to increase the rigor of high school learning. Very commonly, focus group participants talked about the importance of every student having an adult who knows her/him. They often noted that where schools are working very well, the concern teachers have for their students is evident. In adolescence, the nature of “nurture” is changing, and a better understanding of adolescent development should help teachers to

make the transition from what students need to feel connected and to access knowledge at the elementary and middle school levels to how students will become responsible individuals and continue to access knowledge in higher education, the workforce, and life in general.

Change the professional culture of school communities.

Perhaps some of the most difficult changes at the school building level mentioned by the focus group participants are changes to the culture of schools and the teaching profession. Focus group participants want teachers to collaborate more with one another at the high school level. They want to see teaching across content areas in their high schools. They do not expect that every teacher will have special knowledge in fields beyond their scope of expertise. Rather, they want teachers to work together in teams, to learn together and support one another, to “stimulate creativity” among one another. Focus group participants recognize this would mean radical changes in the culture and organization of high schools. Those changes were mentioned over and over by focus group participants. Many participants felt that if teachers, school leaders, and community supporters could acknowledge the special expertise that teachers possess and then help to connect teachers with one another and with community partners, the view of teaching as a profession could change. Some focus group participants hoped that would translate into additional funding for schools and patience in the change process.

Improvements to instruction of the magnitude described above will require the support and buy-in of multiple partners and stakeholders. Higher education will need to improve educator preparation programs. Legislatures and school boards will need to fund ongoing professional development. Principals and teachers will need to take responsibility for common student achievement goals and to work across departments and individual classrooms to achieve those goals. Business leaders will need to provide their support and resources to help students and schools make connections to the “real world.” The good news is that there was resounding support for improvements to teacher quality, and the support came from across the board in the focus groups. This suggests that there could be community buy-in as Arizona undertakes the hard work of changing the professional cultures within its high schools.

Reduce the Number of Students Who Drop Out Early

Though focus group participants were not in a position to talk at length about what a system of high schooling might look like that would truly educate *every* child, they acknowledged that a major concern in Arizona today is the number of students who drop out of high school. Focus group participants want assurance that there would be some room for creativity in high school renewal efforts in order to capture back the large number of kids who are lost in the current system. They were particularly concerned about recapturing the students who drop out early in their high school careers. They mentioned with some regularity how important the transition from middle school to high school is and that everything from guidance counseling to curricular alignments to 9th grade academies should be considered in high school renewal initiatives.

While focus group participants were concerned about making sure that all students ultimately graduate from high school, they were not willing to entertain suggestions that this

could be achieved by lowering the standards. They felt the standards were on target and that through the kinds of improvements suggested, all students should be able to achieve to the existing standards.

Beyond the over-arching kinds of improvements that focus group participants suggested, they were not well versed in what ought to be done specifically to ensure that the nearly one-quarter of students who drop out of school between the 9th and 12th grade actually find a way to stay in and be successful in high school. Participants indicated that some alternative programs work well and some do not, which suggests that there should be some research done on the various alternative programs and the features of those that work. Focus group participants discussed features of traditional schools that worked especially well and many felt that these were the kinds of features that, if common across the system of high schools in Arizona, could help to keep children in school through to graduation. However, the discussions did not center on what specifically could be done to ensure that students at risk of dropping out are provided opportunities to succeed within Arizona’s system of high schools. This is an area where State Team members might look to the ADE high school drop out prevention coordinator, other states, and national non-profit associations such as the National Drop-Out Prevention Network and Jobs for the Future for ideas about what to do.

Focus group participants also suggested that more students who were not making it in the traditional high school needed to be engaged in focus group conversations. The State Team might also consider hosting focus groups of students who are in alternative programs, who are at risk of dropping out, or who have dropped out. The idea of convening a focus group of incarcerated youth was suggested as a way to ensure that the State Team is not simply receiving student input from students who are doing well in the current system.

“I don’t want to know what you know,
but I want to know how much you care,
and then I am going to be interested.”

[Recent Graduate of an Alternative High School]

Diagnose Potential Resistance to Change and Address as Required

While focus group participants were quite optimistic about Arizona’s readiness for change, they also recognized that change can be threatening, frightening, and difficult. Inherent in the focus group conversations about resistance to change is the caution that leaders who misdiagnose the reasoning behind resistance are likely to choose the wrong strategies for overcoming resistance or to not provide the kinds of supports and assurances that those impacted by change will need successfully navigate the change process.

To support that process, focus group participants identified numerous reasons why key stakeholders might resist change. They indicated that many of those who will be told they need to change will experience calls for renewal as indictments of how poorly they have done their jobs to date. As one school board member put it, “Many are invested in the way they are used to doing things and are defensive if asked to do things differently.” This comment suggests that in addition to being sensitive to indictments of their work, many stakeholders will also hold firmly to their beliefs as to how high school should be organized.

Indeed, defensiveness can be especially strong in the high school context when, ultimately, *one's very conception of high school* is being threatened by proposed changes. Fears over losing something important in the process of change can cause many to rebel against renewal efforts. Many “rites of passage” rituals that define adolescence take place in high school and have great meaning among school personnel and the broader public. If renewal efforts in the high schools ignore the importance of the meanings attached to “high school”—by current students, by their parents, and by the broader community—it is entirely possible that renewal efforts will challenge those meanings without their proponents realizing it.

As a general example, when very large comprehensive high schools have been broken into smaller learning communities, the community concern over the size and strength of the comprehensive athletic department has sometimes become the overriding issue in public deliberation. This is not necessarily because athletics are more important than academics in those communities. It is often because community identity and pride is engendered as a result of rallying behind an athletic team. High school in this context has far deeper relevance to community members than many reformers might realize. In such a case, renewal efforts that threaten the athletic program—even as a by-product, if not a target, of the effort—could be met with resistance. Leaders may be able to ward off such resistance if they recognize the unintended consequences of their efforts and the features that would be lost (or perceived to be lost) as a result.

Ronald Heifetz, author of *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, suggests that another reason people resist change is that they fear feelings of incompetence.⁶ Many people are concerned

“High schools are...often a place where people who succeeded in school go to work to feel secure.”

[High School Principal]

that in change they will be asked or required to do things for which they are not well equipped. Focus group participants suggested that many of those who choose to work in high schools do so because they were successful in their own high school experience. Such adults are understandably concerned that in responding to a call for changes to the high school, they will have to give up something that *they* were successful in—and that they will not know how to be successful in the *new* high school.

It was clear from the focus group participants that answering the question of why people might resist different proposed changes is going to be of major importance to Arizona's renewal efforts. The State Team needs to pay attention to how key stakeholders are experiencing and managing change and to identify and provide the supports needed by those stakeholders. By choosing the term “renewal” over “reform,” the State Team has already demonstrated a sensitivity to the messages they may unintentionally send when calling for actions to change Arizona's high schools. A continuing sensitivity to language and a focus on diagnosing resistance will be important as actions plans are defined and implemented.

It may also be instructive to analyze the charter school movement in Arizona. There was initially resistance to the creation of charter schools in many Arizona communities, because of philosophical differences and because there was little expectation that charters would be more than the “reform of the day.” However, some charter schools have overcome public resistance and have developed successful programs that are now supported by their commu-

nities. By looking at what happened in those successful charter school communities, the State Team may garner key lessons that could translate to high school renewal and improvement initiatives. By paying careful attention to what they are asking of schools, school professionals, and the broader school communities when proposing changes or renewal activities, the State Team may be able to interrupt resistance to renewal at the outset.

Ensure AIMS is a Sustainable Instrument for Improvement

Interestingly, Arizona's Instrument for Measuring the Standards (AIMS) was not a topic of major concern in the focus groups. The focus groups were convened only months after results of the spring administration of AIMS were announced and only one week prior to the fall administration. The State Superintendent of Education had just made headlines with his call for the use of tutoring funds to focus on AIMS intervention at the high school level. Yet, AIMS almost never came up in the first hour of focus group discussions and was almost never mentioned when the discussion turned to what was working and not working in Arizona's high schools. When it did arise, it was most often in response to questions about the forces that are causing or creating conditions for change in Arizona's high schools. At that time, there was general discussion about both the good and the bad of AIMS. To the extent a focus on passing AIMS at the high school level gets schools and students to achieve to the state standards, AIMS was seen as a positive by focus group participants. There was a concern expressed, however, that students, schools, and the general public have begun to focus on the *test* itself and not the *standards*. Focus group participants wanted assurance that AIMS would not get in the way of a rich and comprehensive curriculum, that students would not be hurt by the stress of AIMS or the process of test taking, and that the assessments are valid and reliable measures of student achievement. Specific comments centered on the belief that it is not good policy to use one measure to assess student knowledge and skills and that some students are simply bad test takers, so there may need to be an alternate way for them to demonstrate their attainment of the standards.

These comments should inform the administration of AIMS at the high school level. What was most notable, however, was the general lack of furor over the tests among focus group participants. There was a general sense that AIMS is causing people to focus on high schools and it is right that Arizona have that focus.

Continuously inform the public about AIMS.

When focus group participants said they neither want AIMS to be the sole driving force behind high school renewal nor to get in the way of efforts at improving Arizona's high schools, they were expressing concern that schools will feel pressured to focus on test taking skills and drill and practice in the areas tested by AIMS. The comments made about AIMS suggest there must be continuing outreach to teachers, school leaders, parents, community members, businesspeople, and elected officials, to explain the connection of the tests to the standards and instructional practice, to ensure them of the validity and reliability of the AIMS instruments, and to share information about the content of the tests themselves. It further suggests the entire high school faculty may need to see better their roles in helping students achieve the standards tested by AIMS. High school faculty should also be provided

information and training on how they can encourage success on AIMS without compromising the rich curriculum called for by Arizona's standards.

The most commonly cited concern about AIMS is that special education students on IEPs who could never pass AIMS should not be expected to take the tests. Few focus group participants seemed informed that there is an exemption process for special education students. This suggests that some basic outreach on AIMS policies would be of value.

There was even a concern expressed by participants that students might think passing the high school AIMS is enough, so that if they pass in 10th grade they would have little motivation to work hard in their junior and senior years. That concern suggests that students need to understand the connection between AIMS, their entire high school experience, and their eventual entry into the workforce or higher education.

Analyze AIMS results and publicize findings.

The public needs to be more confident that AIMS is technically sound enough to be used for high stakes and that the assessments truly do measure the skills and knowledge that a student should possess in order to graduate from high school. Focus group participants also want to understand why students did so poorly on the mathematics assessments as compared to reading. (Some focus group participants hypothesized that students might not have gotten all the instruction in mathematics they would need to pass AIMS by the tenth grade.) By having continual access to analyses of AIMS results that respond to these kinds of questions, the public can be reassured that the instrument will meet its intended purposes.

Help students to pass AIMS.

Focus group participants want interventions to support students who do not pass AIMS on the first or second administration. At the time of the focus groups, State Superintendent Horne had announced plans to provide tutoring support to those students, but there was not yet an adopted statewide strategy for AIMS intervention. Tutoring was often mentioned as a need of Arizona's students, so plans for tutoring in AIMS subjects would likely meet with support among the general public. However, the overall tenor of the focus group discussions would suggest that if students who do not pass AIMS are instructed solely on the narrow curriculum tested by AIMS, or if they spend a great deal of time learning test taking strategies alone, it is not likely that their high school experience will meet the expectations of the broader community. It will be important that multiple strategies are used to help students achieve the knowledge and skills necessary to pass AIMS, such that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students develop will meet the public's aspirations.

It is also important to note that while the high school AIMS is an exit exam that carries high stakes for individual students, AIMS is administered throughout elementary and middle school as well. Educators at all levels of the system have access to student performance data on AIMS. As more and more elementary and middle school educators learn how to better use AIMS data to improve instruction, there was hope among focus group participants that more students would enter high school with the background needed to prepare them for performance at the high school level.

In summary, it is important to reiterate that AIMS was not at the time of the focus groups first and foremost on the participants' minds. All of the data suggest that while AIMS similarly should not be the sole concern of the State Team, there is not enough understanding among concerned Arizonans about AIMS, its appropriate uses, and its reliability as a measure of student success. The Arizona Department of Education should provide ongoing outreach to the public about AIMS, including descriptions of the technical validity and reliability of the instruments, clear descriptions of the level of knowledge and skill being assessed by AIMS, analyses of AIMS results, and interventions for students who are at risk of failing AIMS and not receiving a high school diploma. Arizona should do all it can to ensure that the focus of its schools and its public does not become consumed with AIMS results at the expense of the rich, well-rounded, motivating curriculum and extra curricular activities that may be as powerful a set of tools to improve student performance as the instrument is to measure it. The State Team should actively ensure that AIMS serves the broader goals of student performance against high standards and does not dictate a narrow, default curriculum.

These recommendations focus on the major themes that are evident across all of the focus groups. The sessions with Arizona's stakeholders provided a great many additional ideas, views, and perspectives. By looking at the full array of data that came from the focus group sessions, State Team leaders can verify the recommendations and continue to refine the work ahead. The following section provides an overview of the comments captured at the focus group sessions; Appendix 1 of the full report displays the full listing of comments from the focus group flip charts (www.ade.state.az.us/asd/AZHSRI/default.asp).

Endnotes

⁴ In particular, participants in more than one focus group felt more students needed to be engaged at this early stage of initiative definition. There was also a feeling that a special focus group ought to be convened in communities of color, particularly the Native American and the Hispanic communities. There was a sense that the Regional Focus Groups needed more parents, but there was not a call to host special focus groups just for parents, probably because participants felt the concerns of parents were generally well represented by those in attendance as parents, as well as those in attendance representing another stakeholder group, but who were also parents of high schoolers themselves.

⁵ American Diploma Project, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts* (Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc.), 2004.

⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 1994.

Focus Group Data

The following section displays the key questions asked of Focus Group participants and a compilation of responses, ordered from most frequently stated to least. Each grouping includes comments made in direct response to the questions asked during that portion of the focus group agenda, as well as comments made randomly during discussion of other agenda items that were more directly related to this grouping of comments.

The headings under each grouping that organize the comments into topical areas were developed by focus group facilitators as they analyzed data from all four Focus Groups. The number in parentheses behind each topical area heading is the number of times a comment related to that topic was placed on the focus group flip charts.

The more frequently comments were made, the more likely that schools or communities will be open to or ready for such approaches to renewal. For example, the first or second most common comment under every heading relates to teachers (and teachers were not disproportionately represented in the focus groups). This would suggest that efforts targeted at supporting teachers and improving their skills would likely find strong support within the broader community.

Data from all four focus groups are combined in the following lists. The full lists of comments are displayed in Appendix 1, accessible at www.ade.state.az.us/asd/AZHSRI/default.asp.

Groupings
Expectations of Our Students
What Our Students Need
What's Working
What's Not Working
Ideas to Foster Long-Term Renewal
Readiness for Change

Expectations of Our Students

Questions Asked:

- What do we want from our high schools?
- What do our students need to know and be able to do as high school graduates?
- What would make you proud of your high school graduates?

Commentary:

More than anything else, focus group participants want high school graduates to be proficient against high standards in academic content areas. Focus group participants were clear that students should be able to read well, write well, and compute well. However, they were equally clear that "academics" extends beyond reading and mathematics. In each setting, participants valued instruction in science, social studies and civics, the arts, health and physical education, and foreign languages.

In addition, the vast majority of comments dealt with outcomes that were not specifically related to core content areas, but, rather, to student habits, dispositions, attitudes, and character. Focus group participants felt that as high school students prepare for work or higher education, less tangible outcomes—such as graduates who are successful and experience their success, have goals, are lifelong learners, critical thinkers, problem solvers, etc.—are at least as important as graduates steeped in content knowledge.

Topics, Rank Ordered:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Proficient academically, in more than just basics and more than just reading and mathematics [11]* | 7. Good Citizens/Upstanding Character [5] |
| 1. Prepared for College or Work [11] | 7. Sense of Self/Pride [5] |
| 3. Life Long Learners [8] | 7. Communication Skills [5] |
| 4. Habits and Dispositions [7] | 11. Life Skills [4] |
| 4. Have a Goal/Plan [7] | 12. Technological Skills [4] |
| 6. Problem Solving/Reasoning [6] | 12. Membership in a diverse society [2] |
| 7. Be Successful [5] | Miscellaneous [5] |

* The number in brackets indicates the number of times comments related to the topic were placed on the flip charts.

What Our Students Need

Questions Asked:

- What do our students need from our high schools in order to meet these expectations and desires?
- What do our students need in order to persist through high school and graduate with the level of knowledge and skills that they need?

Commentary

Tracking well with their expectations of students, in their responses to questions about what Arizona’s students need, focus group participants mentioned access to high quality teachers as the single most important need. Also tracking their expectations, focus group participants felt student needs go beyond academic content to include such things as a caring school community, high expectations, and the involvement of their parents. A rigorous curriculum remained high on their list of identified needs.

Topics, Rank Ordered

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Good Teachers [13] | 10. Flexible Schedule [2] |
| 2. Solid Curriculum [9] | 10. Options [2] |
| 2. Caring School Environment/Community [9] | 10. High Expectations [2] |
| 4. Disciplined, Safe Environment [6] | 10. Small Classes [2] |
| 5. Resources [5] | 10. Relevance [2] |
| 5. Individualized Instruction [5] | 10. A Society that Sees Education as a Priority [2] |
| 5. Extra-Curriculars (athletics, clubs) [5] | 10. School Problem Solving [2] |
| 8. Parents Involved [4] | Miscellaneous [9] |
| 9. Thinking Beyond High School [3] | |

What's Working

Questions Asked:

- Think about the high school in which you work or go to school, the high school your child attends, you represent, is near you, etc.
- What is the best thing going on in that high school?
- What is working in our high schools today?

Commentary:

Nearly one-quarter of the responses to these questions were repeated fewer than five times across all four focus groups. In addition, some items mentioned under what's working also show up under what's NOT working. These data suggest that many of the features that work are due to exceptional teachers and school leaders, unique student bodies, or specialized school organizations rather than system-wide expectations and supports. This begs the question of a state role in Arizona that would help to ensure that localized best practices can be extended across the system and brought to scale.

Topics, Rank Ordered:

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Effective, Caring Teachers [18] | 17. Special Programs [5] |
| 2. Career and Technical Education [11] | 17. Assessment/AIMS [5] |
| 2. Student Pride [11] | 17. Scheduling [5] |
| 4. Courageous Leadership [10] | 17. Diversity [5] |
| 5. Mentoring (Primarily of Students) [9] | 21. Stakeholder Buy-In [4] |
| 5. Standards [9] | 21. Choices [4] |
| 7. Curriculum [7] | 21. Goals for students [4] |
| 7. Professional Development [7] | 21. Relation with the real world [4] |
| 7. Within School Collaboration [7] | 25. Learning [3] |
| 7. Parent Involvement [7] | 26. Continuity with middle school [2] |
| 7. Small Class Size [7] | 26. Freshman Transition [2] |
| 7. Community Involvement [7] | 26. Educational Technology [2] |
| 13. Dual Enrollment/Transitions [6] | 26. Physical Environment [2] |
| 13. Extra Curricular [6] | 26. Variety [2] |
| 13. Flexibility [6] | 26. Fun [2] |
| 13. Individualized Attention [6] | Miscellaneous [13] |

What's Not Working

Questions Asked:

- How well are our high schools and our students meeting these expectations?
- Are our students graduating with the right level of knowledge and skills?
- In what areas do we need most improvement?
- What is not working in our high schools today?

Commentary:

See comments under “What’s Working” related to the fact that some of the same topics show up as both working and not working. This suggests that local access to and implementation of certain programs is variable.

In addition, though “Testing/AIMS” shows up as a feature that is not working, such comments accounted for 7% of the total number of items mentioned. For more information, see the discussion under “Ensure AIMS is a Sustainable Instrument for Improvement” above.

Topics, Rank Ordered:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Challenges Facing Teachers [31] | 14. Students Neither Engaged in Learning nor School Improvement [6] |
| 2. Resistance to Change/Difficulty of Change [24] | 14. Curriculum [6] |
| 3. Expectations—Too Low, Not Right Mix, and Not Held in Common [20] | 16. Mobility [5] |
| 4. Testing/AIMS [18] | 16. Pressures/Lack of Guidance [5] |
| 5. Money and Resources [14] | 16. Legislative process, outcomes [5] |
| 6. Not Enough Collaboration [11] | 19. Lack of focus [3] |
| 7. Parents/Family [10] | 19. Kids with jobs [3] |
| 8. Class Size/School Size Too Big [8] | 19. Limited technological infrastructure [3] |
| 8. Schedule [8] | 19. Social promotion [3] |
| 8. Low student skills/Students not academically prepared for high school/Too many drop-outs [8] | 23. Tradition [2] |
| 11. Traditional Grade Levels/Content Areas—Neither Fully Standards-Based Nor Focused on the Right Things [7] | 23. ELL [2] |
| 11. More Connection to Work [7] | 23. Accountability [2] |
| 11. Special Groups of Students [7] | 23. Communication [2] |
| | 23. NCLB [2] |
| | 23. Transportation [2] |
| | Miscellaneous [20] |

Ideas to Foster Long-Term Renewal

Question Asked:

- What ideas do you have for changes—big or small—that would make the high school experience for you, your child, all the students of Arizona better?

Commentary:

Focus group participants generated many ideas for change in Arizona's high schools. The ideas were sorted into sub-headings, which were then grouped under major headings. The major headings are listed below in ranked order. The total number of comments under each major heading was attained by adding the number of comments under each sub-heading.

Topics, Rank Ordered:

1. Standards and Curriculum [88]
 - Well-Rounded Curriculum* [44]
 - Diversity/ELL/Multicultural Learning* [10]
 - Career Focus* [12]
 - Standards* [7]
 - Learning Environments/School Climate* [5]
 - Life Skills* [4]
 - Extra-curricular* [4]
 - Student Empowerment* [2]
2. Improve Teaching [57]
 - Teacher Professional Development* [17]
 - High Quality Teachers/Teacher Professionalism/Expectations* [12]
 - Teacher Preparation* [9]
 - Teacher Collaboration* [8]
 - Teacher Incentives and Resources* [7]
 - Teachers as Advisors* [2]
 - Miscellaneous* [2]
3. School Organization [46]
 - School Schedule* [23]
 - Smaller Schools/Smaller Learning Communities* [10]
 - Lower Class Sizes* [8]
 - Time* [3]
 - Dual Enrollment* [2]
4. Instruction [28]
 - Individualize Instruction* [14]
 - Instructional/Educational Technology* [4]
 - Mentoring* [3]
 - Peer Tutoring* [3]
 - Tutoring* [2]
 - Miscellaneous* [2]
5. Resources [20]
5. Parental Support [20]
5. Allies—Collaboration/Advocacy/Partnerships [20]
8. Improve Transitions into High School [9]
9. Consistent Accountability Grades K–12 [3]
9. School Leadership [3]
11. Vision [2]
 - Miscellaneous* [13]

Forces Creating Conditions for Change

Questions Asked:

- What forces are working in favor of an agenda of change?
- How ready are our schools to engage in high school renewal?
- How ready are we to support high school renewal?

Commentary:

There was a general sense among focus group participants of tremendous readiness for change in Arizona's high schools. Indeed, some educators are literally begging for ideas about how to improve schooling, largely because of the pressure they feel to prepare all of their students to pass the AIMS high school exams. Focus group participants also pointed to evidence of change already taking place, such as the advent of charter schools and the shift in emphasis in career and technical education. There were cautions that there is not a general consensus about what is wrong in Arizona's high schools or that there even is a need for increased standards and student performance across the board. In general, however, there seemed to be a shared sense that schools, school leaders, and the general public will support change, even as there continually must be a case made for improving high school education in Arizona.

Topics, Rank Ordered:

1. Challenges Facing Students [5]
2. Testing and Accountability [4]
3. Ready for Change [3]
4. Charter Schools Demonstrate Readiness to Change [2]
4. Culture and Language [2]
4. New Expectations [2]
- Miscellaneous [7]

What Else Should Be On the Table?

Questions Asked:

- What didn't we get on the table?
- What critical elements of the high school experience are missing from our conversation thus far?

Commentary

There was a general sense among focus group participants that the most important topics were discussed. Data from group evaluations, individual evaluation forms, and individual comment forms indicated a general sense that, at that time, everything the focus group participants most cared about had been expressed. Focus Group participants suggested that the topics identified below either did not get discussed in enough detail or were not in the conversation at all. Each comment below was offered one time.

Topics (22)

- Latino community
- Rural ed
- Urban ed
- Facts regarding status—where are we
- Make case statement
- Nutrition, health, outside activities (video games)
- Economic issues
- Special Ed
- Gifted
- Advocacy in state legislature
- Role of strong leadership
- Adult basic education
- Revisiting graduation requirements for IEP students
- Issue of resources, reallocations, strategies
- Conversation, presence of state-fed @ local end
- \$
- Buildings
- Wages
- Class size
- Consolidation/Unification
- Not talked about private high schools re: expectations
- Ruby Payne's understanding of poverty

Miscellaneous Comments

Occasionally, a focus group would discuss a topic and individuals would offer comments that did not directly respond to the questions before the group. In those cases, comments were captured, but were categorized under “Over-Archiving/Framework Issues” or the “Parking Lot.” The “Parking Lot” is a facilitation tool where you capture footnote-type comments made in discussions, which may or many not be reviewed later, depending upon the nature of the discussions and the comments. The miscellaneous comments from all focus groups are recorded below.

Over-Archiving/Framework Issues

- In past, was okay to “throw away” kids—now not okay—changes whole focus
- Kids can do more than we are expecting
- 78% of businesses in Yuma are 6 employees or less
- Use data from inventories of students
- Proposal for Navajo nation to take over education, Navajo community not totally for it
- Be cautious about throwing out everything that is old

Parking Lot

- High school is for everyone—meet every need, interest, wish
- Graduation is end
- High school is life
- Happens in pockets
- Difficult to translate ed jargon

Endnotes

⁷ When Career and Technical Education (CTE) came up in the focus groups as something that is working, the shift that took place recently to go from purely vocational education to an education that integrates vocational skills with academic content knowledge was the basic feature that mattered most to focus group participants. There was a desire for that kind of integration to be taking place across high school programs, including for the college bound. By “integration,” focus group participants value programs that help make high school “book learning” relevant to students; introduce students to the “world of work” and career options; help students to develop the kinds of skills, habits, and dispositions they will need in the workplace; and respond to student interests and motivations.